

A flashback to the past

Joe Attean: More than Thoreau's guide

By S. Glenn Starbuck, Jr.

INDIAN ISLAND — One hundred years after the death of Joseph Attean, it is difficult for the historian to understand why his only claim to fame in the eyes of the public is that for a short time he was Henry David Thoreau's personal guide.

Attean was far more than Indian guide. He was the son of a chief, descended from a long line of chiefs. He had the character, qualities and ability needed for the station into which he was born in 1829. The meager records of Penobscot Tribal History which tell us of the troubled times through which he lived give us brief sketches of his life story but more than that, they tell us of the political factionalism that nearly tore the tribe to pieces. It was finally settled, largely through the efforts and abilities of Attean.

A winning team

He worked, as did his fellow tribesmen, in the woods and on the river drives to earn his living, for this was a time when the lives of most Maine men were spent in the woods and on the rivers.

Attean and his nephew Stephen Stanislaus soon gained a reputation for being two of the best river drivers and boatmen on the Penobscot. They normally worked in the same boat, one at the bow and one at the stern and so well did they work together, they were nearly twins in their height, weight, general looks, manners and mental outlook that they operated their boat almost as a single man. The fact that Stanislaus was not in the boat the day Joseph Attean died was the one factor perhaps more than any other that sealed his fate and that of two others.

Joseph Attean was born Christmas Day, 1829 and grew up during the 1830's and 1840's when strong resistance was growing to many of his father's policies, and those policies of his father's Lieutenant Governor, John Neptune.

This resistance and political unrest eventually came to a head in 1838 when the group opposed to Attean and Neptune, after consulting with the heads of the Passamaquoddy and Maliseet tribes, always up to this time federated with the Penobscots attempted to depose Attean and Neptune and choose new chiefs. Therefore a convention of the three tribes was called to meet at Indian Island Old Town in August 1838 for an election according to ancient custom.

The group opposed to the old chiefs accomplished their purpose and chose new ones but the trouble did not end there for the old leaders refused to step down and their supporters continued to regard them as the true Heads of the Tribe.

Neither party would back down, even rejecting the State's well-meaning effort at settlement the next year. From that time on those who followed Attean and Neptune were called the Old Party and those favoring the newly-elected leaders Tomor Sockalexis and Attean Orson, the New Party.

This state of affairs continued throughout the 1840's causing much discord and disruption in tribal life. Because of this more and more authority of the chiefs was taken over by the State and in several instances political differences resulted in actual bloodshed. When John Hubbard became Governor of Maine he immediately tried to find a way to bring some order out of the chaos that was developing rapidly in both tribes, for a similar situation existed among the Passamaquoddies. In the case of the Passamaquoddies he was successful, with the Penobscots he was not.

Political entry skills

The agreement entered into about 1850 between the officers and principal members of both parties at the signing of the Governor of Maine provided that: "As John Attean and John Neptune were chosen according to the ancient usages of the tribe into their respective offices, that they should remain in said offices during the remainder of their

lives, and on the decease of one or both, the vacancy should be filled by majority vote of the male members of the tribe of twenty-one years of age and upwards, in a meeting duly called by the Agent. Said officers to continue for two years, and that an election should be held every year to choose one member of the tribe to represent the tribe before the Legislature and the Governor and Council."

Elections were then held annually for choice of representative and although the State now recognized Attean and Neptune as the legal chiefs there still existed much ill feelings often resulting in riot conditions at many elections.

Governor John Attean died in 1856 and after the usual period of mourning the Old

Party was willing to submit himself to the elective process for possession of an office that was already his by hereditary right.

Exactly how the firebrands of the two parties were persuaded to submit themselves to the ballot is not known but quite likely Attean's patience and forbearance played a large part in it. Only one change seems to have been made in the 1850 agreement, that the elections should be annual instead of biennial beginning in 1862. Eckstern says in "The Penobscot Man," "Joseph Attean won his election by popular vote against great opposition, and carried seven out of the eight elections held up to the time of his death. The eighth, by the intervention of the so-called 'Special Law' passed by the state to reduce the friction between the parties, was

the river drives in the spring and summer. It was while on one of those drives in 1870, near what is now Millinocket, that Attean was drowned in the West Branch of the Penobscot, trying to save the lives of three fellow drivers who could not swim.

Eckstern has told the story as called from the memories of the men who were there and saw it happen in her book "The Penobscot Man." She said the logs were "ricked up like jackstraws on both sides of the falls." In one boat was Attean, but on this day his nephew Stanislaus was not with him and this in the end made the difference. In Stanislaus' place was Charles Prouty, young and inexperienced.

John Ross, the River Boss, later told Eckstern the responsibility was really his for getting Prouty in the low position in that boat in the first place.

The boat veered, shot across the chattering current among the jagged rocks on the opposite shore close above the stretch of water known as Blue Rock Patch. All those who could swim jumped except Attean. Attean dropped his useless pole and grabbed his paddle but the boat would not respond.

Attean stayed with boat

Three non-swimmers clung to the boat, Eckstern says. "And Joe Attean stayed with them, not clinging as they did, buried in water; not crouching and apert, waiting for the death that faced him, not a coward now, never, but paddle in hand, because the water ran too deep for a pole-hold, standing astride his corked boat, a big caulked foot upon either gunwale, working with the last ounce that was in him to drive the sunken wreck and the men clinging to it into some eddy or cleft of the log-jams before they were carried down over the thundering falls.

Attean's death closed a turbulent era in Penobscot history. His life had been short. But by the time he died in 1870, the political life of the tribe had been given a new lease, largely through his efforts. It had turned in a new direction now and was held somewhat in check by the paternalistic power of the state. And it enabled new generations of Penobscots to develop the political skills that would give them an ever-increasing control over their own destiny in the middle half of the coming century.



JOSEPH ATTEAN — A celebrated Penobscot Indian who was Thoreau's guide and an expert on the Penobscot River log drives. This portrait will be exhibited at the tribal governor's office at Indian Island.

Party declared his son Joseph his successor, and he was duly inaugurated by them according to ancient Indian custom, for life.

The succession to the offices of governor and lieutenant governor was still a hotly disputed issue between the two parties but now a generation had passed since the original rupture and it seems apparent that Joseph Attean had decided in his own mind that the time was ripe to settle the chaotic political situation once and for all.

"Good and open-hearted"

Fannie Hardy Eckstern's "The Penobscot Man" describes Joseph Attean as "not only brave but good, an open-hearted, patient, forbearing sort of man... loved for his mild justice." Those were exactly the qualities needed in a leader, especially at that particular period.

In addition to his leadership abilities Attean had the prestige of his background and ancestry, an ancestry that traditionally traced to Chief Madockawando and perhaps even further to the half-legendary Bashaaba. With these assets Attean commanded respect from even his New Party political opponents. As soon as Attean was firmly in control of his own party he seems to have made enforcement of the agreement of 1850 one of the first issues to be settled.

Attean felt sure of his position and so earnestly did he desire a solution to the tribe's leadership question, that he was

the New Party's first election, none of Joseph Attean's party, the Old Party, or Conservatives, voting that year."

Attean's popularity even among New Party members did not set too well with New Party leaders, with the result that the Special Law of 1866, (mentioned above) was passed giving the two parties exclusive election rights in alternate years beginning in 1867 with the Old Party.

The agreement shows how far Attean was willing to go to settle the party animosity that had almost destroyed his tribe's political existence. Attean and his new Lieutenant-Governor Saul Neptune (who was chosen by the Old Party to succeed his father John upon the latter's death in 1865) had little to fear in an open election.

The new law had the desired effect, and from that time on, for the most part, elections were conducted in an orderly manner, everyone abiding by the results until the law was again changed about 1900.

Drowned on river drive

Unfortunately, Attean was not to live to see the long term results of his efforts.

Holding political office in the Penobscot Tribe at that period was not the best place to earn a living. Although there was a small stipend, the holder of any office in the tribe could not support a family on it.

In Attean's case his livelihood involved working in the woods in the winter and on